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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, DRL

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SUBJECT: SAHRAWI PRISONERS: SEPTEMBER 23 UPDATE

REF: RABAT 1997 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) On September 23, Poloff contacted Assia El Ouadia, member of the Consultative Council for Human Rights (CCDH) and the Mohamed VI Foundation for the Integration of Former Prisoners. Ouadia accompanied Chawki Benyoub, who heads the CCDH committee on "Control of Violations in Moroccan Prisons," to Oukacha prison in Casablanca on September 20 to visit the four Sahrawi prisoners detained there (reftels). Ouadia had refused to talk to the press about her visit but had no hesitation to Poloff. She related that a doctor accompanied her to the prison and that all four of the prisoners showed no signs of abuse and exhibited no problems beyond their weakened state. When questioned whether the prisoners health required hospitalization, she said no. The doctor confirmed that the prisoners' health was fine and that the prisoners had not been tortured. Ouadia said that the prisoners would begin eating if they were transferred to the prison in Laayoune, where the court is and where their families reside. (Note: As noted reftel, Ahmed El Moutawakil said his brother Mohamed's family is in Casablanca. End Note.) Ouadia understood that the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) would be transferring the prisoners soon but was unsure of a date.

2. (SBU) On Moroccan TV the evening of September 22, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Mohamed

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Lididi, discussed his visit to the Laayoune prison earlier that day and emphasized that the prisoners are being treated the same as all prisoners, that is "based on equality." He said there were "no worrying cases at the moment." When a prisoner shows symptoms or signs of fatigue, Lididi said, a doctor sees him immediately. Lididi also alleged that the photographs purporting to show the prisoners in overcrowded conditions were "manipulated." Lididi said that the prisoners are under constant medical supervision and have the right to serve their sentences in prisons located near their families. He added that transferring prisoners to another prison must take into consideration the availability of rehabilitation programs which can provide them with skills. According to Lididi, some of the prisoners have appealed their cases in accordance with law. He also said that some of the prisoners' cases were still being investigated.

3. (C) Comment: Lididi's comments about prisoners being moved to prisons close to their families is compatible with Ouadia's comment to Poloff. It is likely that the GOM is laying the public basis for eventually transferring all of the prisoners to Laayoune. At the same time, however, Ahmed el Moutawakil said clearly that his brother's family (Mohamed El Moutawakil) is in Casablanca.

RILEY